DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 845 CS 008 500

AUTHOR Redencich, Marguerite C.
TITLE S.T.A.R.: A Strategy for Taking Timed Tests.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Journal Articles (080) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)
JOURNAL CIT Forum for Reading; v17 n1 p29-34 Fall-Win 1985

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; Essay Tests; Objective Tests; Student Evaluation; *Study Skills; Test Coaching; *Test Wiseness; *Timed Tests
IDENTIFIERS *STAR Test Taking Strategy

ABSTRACT

Based on the classic test-wiseness principles of J. Millman, C. H. Bishop, and R. Ebel, the STAR strategy streamlines the taking of timed tests. Before explaining the strategy to students, the instructor can convince students of the advantages of the strategy by administering a short test to determine students' test-wiseness. The STAR strategy consists of the following steps: (1) survey the test to gauge time in terms of item difficulty and point value; (2) take time to read directions carefully; (3) answer test items as directed, answering familiar questions and marking unfamiliar ones to return to later; and (4) reread the questions and the answers, revising when necessary. (A copy of a test-wiseness test and a detailed explanation of the STAR strategy are included.) (HTH)

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S.T.A.R.: A Strategy for Taking Timed Tests

Marguerite C. Redencich

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S.T.A.R.: A strategy for taking timed tests

Marguerite C. Redencich
Dade County Public Schools
Miami, Florida

The literature abounds with study skill acronyms. SQ3R (Robinson, 1946), begat OK4R (Pauk, 1974), PQRST (Spache & Berg, 1966), and PQ4R (Thomas & Robinson, 1977) to name but a few. But after learning content, students must then be able to demonstrate their knowledge. There are no mneumonic devices which students can latch onto to help them become good test-takers. S.T.A.R. is an easily remembered strategy which supplies this missing link.

The amount of time which American students spend taking tests is perhaps second only to their time engaged in watching TV. And despite demonstrated advantages to teaching test-taking skills (e.g., Jongsma, Pound & Tips, 1978; Bergman, 1980), there appears to be very little systematic instruction in this area. As a result, there is a lack of test sophistication among students of all ages. There are of course materials on the market designed to prepare students for taking any number of specific tests. S.T.A.R. differs from these in that it is a strategy which can be used in taking any timed test, be it standardized or teacher-made. Students of all ages are required to take timed tests. Thus, S.T.A.R. has applicability to all students. However, it is directed primarily to the secondary and college population.

S.T.A.R. is based on the classic test-wiseness principles proposed by Millman, Bishop and Ebel (1965). It streamlines the taking of timed tests with the following steps:

I. **S**urvey the test to gauge your time.
II. **T**ake time to read directions carefully.
III. **A**nswer test items as directed.
IV. **R**eread the questions and the answers.

As with any strategy, S.T.A.R. will only be helpful if students are convinced of its necessity. A technique which has proved to be motivating with this author's college developmental reading class is to give the students a "test to test test-wiseness" before explaining the strategy. Parrish (1982) cleverly devised such a test using reading/study skills items for the content, and arranging these items such that students who were "test-wise" could do well on the test regardless of their knowledge of this content. An analysis of the many errors which students typically make on such a test provides a concrete referent which increases student receptiveness to the S.T.A.R. strategy.

This author developed a test similar to Parrish's for two purposes. First, the availability of an alternate instrument allows for pre- and post-testing. Second, this test adds problem-solving items to its essay and objective items; Parrish's test had only the latter two components.

Printed below is this test and explanations of its items. Following this is an explanation of how S.T.A.R. makes use of the test information.

How test-wise are you?

Complete the following test. Then check the answers below.

A. *Multiple Choice*

Write the letter of the correct choice on the blank before each item.
Value: 2 points each

__ 1. Determining the meanings of words can best be accomplished by
a) separating words into root, prefix and suffix
b) using a dictionary

c) asking someone
d) using context clues
e) using a variety of strategies

__ 2. An appropriate study schedule should
a) not allow any opportunity for cramming
b) can study the more difficult material first
c) utilize all of a student's leisure time
d) allow some opportunity for cramming

__ 3. In previewing a chapter, you should do all of the following except
a) look at the summary
b) look at the subtitles
c) look at the diagrams
d) read the chapter carefully
e) a, b, & c

B. *Matching*
Write the letter of the correct answer in the blank. Answers may be used more than once. Wrong answers will be subtracted from right answers. Value: 3 points each

__ 1. preview	a) a writing system
__ 2. idiographic	b) prereading a chapter
__ 3. Alan Lakein	c) having to do with the group
__ 4. survey	d) having to do with the individual
__ 5. nomothetic	e) author of a book on time management

C. *True-False*
Write "true" or "false" on the line in front of each item.
Value: 4 points each

__ 1. Students who finish tests quickly never do well.
__ 2. Watching the professor for cues on important facts and taking lengthy notes on everything she/he says are good note-taking habits.
__ 3. Students should use the same rate when reading different textual materials.

D. *Fill in the Blank*
Write the missing word in the blanks. Value: 6 points each
1. Students who do not have good _____ schedules are often not prepared at exam time.
2. Rate will differ if one is studying as opposed to reading for _____.

E. *Essays*
On the back of this test write a short essay on one of the following topics. Value: 20 points
1. Compare and contrast strategies for finding books and articles in a library.
2. Evaluate the following statement: "Reading rate should be the same for all textbook reading".

F. *Problem-solving*
Solve the following problems. Value: 5 points each
1. Assume you missed one item on each of the first four parts of this test. Compute the total number of points you have earned on these parts.
2. Select the correct answer for the following problem: Your grades for this course are 5, 6, 8, 4, and 10. Select the answer which correctly gives your average.
__ a) 6
__ b) 7
__ c) 66/10
__ d) 6.4
__ e) none of the above

Answers to "How test-wise are you?"

A-1. This question is an example of overlapping answers. Answer "e" subsumes the other answers. If you are in too much of a hurry and do not examine all the choices, you would not get to "e". Also, including a general word such as "variety" in "e" makes it a likely choice.

A-2. The answer can be arrived at through the process of elimination; "b" is grammatically incorrect; "a" is the opposite of the correct answer; "c" is absurd. Also, "a" uses the specific phrase "not allow for any," and "d" uses the more conservative wording "allow some."

A-3. The key word is "except". Notice also that most of the answers begin with "look at"; the different wording of "d" might also be a clue.

B. Item 3 can be inferred. You must read the directions to find out that you don't have to have a different answer for each item. "B" is the answer to both items 1 and 4. If you know that "graph" means "write", you might be led to guess (incorrectly) that the match for "idiographic" (item 2) is "a". However, if you are test-wise, you will leave items 2 and 5 blank if you do not know the matches rather than risk the penalty for guessing.

C-1. The answer can be deduced as false because of the use of the specific word "never".

C-2. The answer is false because part of the information is false.

C-3. If you do not know the answer to this item, the information provided by the later essay question "2" should give a hint as to the likely answer. Also, if you have answered the last three items with "T" or "F", they are incorrect as you were instructed to spell out "true" or "false".

D. The length of the spaces gives clues as to the length of the desired responses. The word "study" has been used elsewhere in the test and thus can be deduced as a likely answer for item 1. The answer to item 2 (pleasure) is obviously the opposite of studying.

E. If you do not follow directions, you will complete both essay items. Also, knowledge of the meaning of the key words "compare", "contrast" and "evaluate" is necessary to correctly complete this item.

F-1. Answer: 27. Did you remember to deduct wrong answers from right answers on part B? Did you ignore the directions and compute your score from all five parts? If you did not get the correct score, chances are you made a careless mistake. Careless mistakes are perhaps the most common error on problem-solving tests.

F-2. The answer is "c". It can be reduced to 6.6, which is the correct answer. Your first impulse might have been to select "e", but you must watch out for answers which are not in the form which you expect.

Following is an explanation of the steps in S.T.A.R., using the "How test-wise are you?" as a framework.

I. Survey the test to gauge your time: Students should quickly inspect the test to gauge their time in terms of item difficulty and point value. The aim here is to help them avoid the expenditure of too much time on difficult items and not enough time on items of high point value. The key word at this step is speed.

There may be a conflict in asking students to begin with the easier items and with those of highest point value. The easier items may be those of least point value. In the test above, objective questions (parts A, B, C, D, and F) may be easier and are definitely worth fewer points than are the essay questions (part E). Typically, tests with both objective and essay questions present them in this order. If the objective questions are completed first, students who have not surveyed the test may not get to the essays. A practical solution would be to begin with the easier items but to allow plenty of time for the items of greater point value.

II. Take time to read directions carefully: Students sometimes omit this step altogether. (See directions for E). Or they read the directions but then neglect to follow them. At other times they focus only on the first part of the directions. (See directions for B). The obvious way to teach students to avoid these pitfalls is to give them tests where they are likely to make such mistakes. Thus, the instructor can give tests with unexpected or with two-part directions. These can then be examined in terms of direction-following errors.

The importance of watching out for unexpected directions can be brought home to students via the old standby test which directs them to:

1. Read all directions before marking the paper.
2. Circle all the i's.
3. Fill in all the o's.

.
.
.

9. Do not follow any of the first eight directions.
10. Do not make any marks on this paper.

Typically of course, students fail such a test.

III. Answer test items as directed: This is of course the step where the bulk of the test-taking time must be spent. Tips for answering the items depend on the type of test involved. Students should do the items they know first, marking the ones which they wish to return to.

A. Objective Tests: Students must be taught to use the process of elimination. They should guess if there is no penalty for guessing. If there is a penalty, they should risk it only if they can narrow the answer down somewhat. (See B-2 and B-5).

Students should make use of prior knowledge, of context and/or structural analysis when guessing at the meanings of unknown words. The meaning of "appendectomy" might be guessed from the sentence, "His abdominal area was sore after his appendectomy." Furthermore, a student might recognize the word "appendix" and might know that a tonsillectomy is the removal of tonsils and thus surmise that an appendectomy must mean the removal of the appendix.

Specific types of objective tests require specific strategies:

1) **Multiple Choice Tests:** Students must attend to the wording of stems particularly when they include key words such as "the first" or "which is NOT an example of . . .". (See A-3). Practice with "tricky" wordings will help make recognition of such items automatic.

Test-takers should read all the options and not guess too soon - they may be asked to select not a correct answer but the best answer. If the first choice seems correct and the student does not read on, he/she will make an incorrect decision. (See A-1). Also, students can be taught to get clues from poorly constructed items where some answers do not grammatically match the stem. (See A-2).

2) **Matching Tests:** Students should first complete the items of which they are more certain. They must note whether directions indicate that answers may be used more than once, and proceed accordingly. (See B directions). If answers may only be used once, they should be marked off as they are used. However, if students run into trouble later on in the matching, they should check the marked answers to see if they have made an error. When there is a one-to-one match, students should not blindly assume that the final stem corresponds to the remaining answer, but should use this match as an accuracy check.

3) **True-False Tests:** Test-takers should be aware that everything must be true if a statement is to be marked true, but only one detail need be false for an item to be marked false. (See C-2). Students should also attend to key words such as "always", "never", "no" and "only" which often make a statement false (see C-1 and also A-2); to more conservative statements like "some", "usually" and "most" which are often true (see A-2); and to words which qualify statements such as "good", "best", and "much" which can alter the meanings of statements.

4) **Fill in the Blanks:** Clues here are similar to those for other types of multiple-choice tests. (See D).

B. Essay Tests: Keeping essay answers relevant depends to a great extent on students' ability to detect key words and to organize their ideas. Students must know the distinct meanings of terms such as the following: compare, contrast, define, describe, discuss, enumerate, evaluate, explain and show. Test-takers can underline such key words in test questions in order to help them focus in on the exact question they are being asked to answer. (See E).

A timed essay test may not allow much time for a written outline, but students must have at least a mental outline if their essays are to have any degree of organization. They should also include an introduction and a summary to lend cohesion to long essay items.

C. Problem-solving Tests: Carelessness can of course be a major problem with problem-solving tests. (See F-1). Something else to watch out for is the provision of answers in a format other than that expected by the test-taker. (See F-2).

IV. Reread the questions and the answers: Test-takers must learn to revise their work regardless of how anxious they are for a test to be over and done with. Revisions must include the questions as well as the answers. Students may have terrific answers - to the wrong questions. Students should utilize insights which they've gained in working through the test to answer items they were unsure of. (See C-3). The last step is a check over the entire test.

A word of caution: In any type of test, there is no substitute for knowledge of the subject matter. Students must not be led to believe that test-taking tips will be a panacea for a lack of content information.

The description of S.T.A.R. has not included tips which depend upon the test sophistication of the test constructor. Such tips can backfire on students. For example, a wordy multiple-choice answer is a dead giveaway if the test has been constructed by someone who is not conscious of such details (e.g., Cronbach, 1950; McMorris et al, 1972). But in the hands of a veteran test-constructor, such an answer could be a decoy. Other examples include a multiple-choice answer with wording which differs from the wording of the other answers (as in A-3), or the length of spaces in fill-in-the-blank items (as in D). These tips have been included in the explanations given with the test-wiseness test for optional use by the instructor.

In summary, S.T.A.R. is a viable strategy for use with timed tests. It is recommended that a concrete test-wiseness test such as the one presented here be used to bring home the value of the strategy. A follow-up with a posttest of a similar nature can further reinforce the instruction. Additionally, students can make up similar items from their major field in order to encourage transfer of learning.

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